

The Vidocq Society: A “Free” Cold Case Resource

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In the past decade, many law enforcement agencies have dusted off unsolved homicide files and began to review these “cold case” murders. Whether through the use of specialized cold case squads or through individual detective initiative, these cases once thought unsolvable are increasingly being re-examined for potential solution through utilization of advanced technology or changes in personal relationships. In some instances, organizational leadership must decide which cases will be re-opened and which will not. Age of the case, lack of physical evidence or remaining department records, and other factors may influence this decision. Had these cases been easy to solve, they would have been solved earlier. Optimization of budgetary and personnel resources may be a primary consideration in the decision to move forward with some unsolved cases while not others. Cold case homicide investigation is expensive in terms of personnel commitment and evidence assessment and re-testing. In the review and investigation of cold case homicides, local and state law enforcement has a friend whose services come without charge. This friend is the Vidocq Society.

ORGANIZATION AND BACKGROUND

The Vidocq Society was founded in 1990 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, by William Fleisher (retired), the renowned forensic sculptor Frank Bender, and Richard Walter (retired), a Michigan state prison forensic psychologist. Fleisher is former Philadelphia police officer, FBI agent, and at the time, Assistant Special Agent in Charge of the U.S. Customs Service in Philadelphia. Bender is a talented sculptor and forensic reconstructionist with an uncanny ability to recreate faces for law enforcement from partial and complete skulls. His work has aided in the apprehension of long term fugitives such as family murderer John List and the identification of unknown

victims, and has been featured in major documentaries and on television world-wide. Walter is highly regarded for his insight into crime scene and behavioral analysis. This trio desired to establish a venue at which persons from within and outside of law enforcement and forensics could gather to discuss crimes and mysteries. The organization was named for Eugene Francois Vidocq, a 18th century French crook-turned-cop who became a famous detective and the first chief of the Sûreté in 1811 (Figure 1). Attention grew as other law enforcement persons joined the group, bringing additional criminal investigative expertise. Ultimately, the Society narrowed its mandate to focus on unsolved “cold case” homicides, and in some cases, disappearances.

Today, the organization consists of active duty and retired law enforcement personnel, forensic professionals and private citizens who donate deductive, scientific, and other talents for the common good. All work is done at no cost to the victim’s families or law enforcement, and their sole purpose is to act as a catalyst and provide guidance to law enforcement agencies to assist in solving these crimes. The Vidocq Society is a non-profit charitable organization under Section 501c (3) of the IRS Code. The Society obtains its financial support from membership dues and voluntary contributors willing to help underwrite their pro bono services. The Vidocq Society has been recognized as a cold case resource by the U.S. Department of Justice.

MEMBERSHIP

Membership in the Vidocq Society is limited to 82 regular Vidocq Society Members (V.S.M.s) and a restricted number of special members who represent a variety of disciplines, including law enforcement, forensics, psychology, private investigation, business and other diverse backgrounds. Membership is by invitation only, based upon the needs

of the organization and the particular skills and abilities of potential members. Currently, the membership comes from 17 states and 11 other countries.

Members and their invited guests normally meet over lunch on the third Thursday of each month at the Downtown Club, in the historic Public Ledger Building in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. At these meetings they listen to guest presenters share the facts of an unsolved case. Afterwards, a group question and answer session ensues as they apply their collective forensic skills to attempt to solve the “cold case” homicide or unsolved death. All case information and discussions are confidential.

The Vidocq Society publishes The Vidocq Society Journal at least four times per year. Articles that appear in this journal do not include confidential Vidocq Society information or matters. Articles may be contributed by members and non-members.

CASE INTAKE CRITERIA

The Society selects its cases carefully and works closely with case investigators and prosecutors. The Vidocq Society assists in the investigation of unsolved deaths and homicides only when law enforcement agencies accept their support, and the investigating agency directs all Vidocq Society efforts. The Vidocq Society will undertake an investigation only after they are contacted by a family member or a law enforcement agency asking for the Vidocq Society to review an unsolved cold case. A family member making a request must have standing in the case. In all cases, the investigating law enforcement agency must welcome the help of the Vidocq Society. Follow-up investigation and suggested investigative direction usually result from a Vidocq presentation.

For the Vidocq Society to consider an unsolved death or homicide case, certain criteria must be met: 1) the death must have occurred

at least two years prior; 2) the victim cannot have been engaged in dangerous or illicit activity of any kind; 3) if presented to a meeting by law enforcement or an investigator with standing in the case, no family members may be present; and 4) the Vidocq Society will not provide progress reports, updates or other information to the family. Information provided to the Vidocq Society is maintained in a confidential manner.

APPLICATION AND REVIEW PROCESS

To formally request Vidocq Society review of an unsolved homicide or questionable death, those requesting assistance must read the mission and intake process available at the Vidocq Society World Wide Web page. If the death falls within Vidocq Society guidelines, forward a letter by U.S. Postal service to Vidocq Society Case Referrals at the address shown at the end of this article. The letter should include only photocopies of any police reports, forensic summaries, or other relevant documents or newspaper clippings. Prior to submitting required materials by U.S. Mail, questions may be submitted to the Director of Case Management at the Vidocq Society website.

Upon receipt of the material sent with the request for investigation, along with any other facts gathered independently by the Society personnel, a determination will be made to ascertain whether the case or matter meets Vidocq's basic acceptance criteria. If it is decided that the crime may qualify, the case is assigned to additional experts for further review and analysis.

CASE PRESENTATION

Some cases become Vidocq meeting presentations where formal discussions of the case and its parameters include a question and answer session among the presenter and membership present. The presenter of a cold-case homicide or disappearance at a Vidocq Society meeting is usually: 1) a law enforcement professional who has investigated the murder over the years and continues to carry it on his/her caseload, or their successor; or 2) in some instances, a Vidocq Society member.

Presentation takes place in a private setting over lunch. Presenters may use 35mm slide presentations, PowerPoint®, or other formats. Presentations should include: 1)

background of known events leading up to the crime; 2) review of all persons of interest; 3) review of forensic evidence; 4) statements of important witnesses and persons of interest; and 5) overview of the investigation.

Presenters must not hold back any information as it is important that all known facts relevant to the case be offered for consideration and review. Written synopses, timelines, and other material to help bring membership "up to speed" in a timely manner is appreciated, and may be returned after the presentation at the discretion of the presenter. Sufficient time is allotted for presentation, although most are no more than 30 minutes in length. It is helpful if presenter's leave sufficient number of business cards for the membership for future communications.

Following the presentation, formal discussions include a question-and-answer period. This is a collaborative effort that involves members and invited guests. Case presentations conclude with a call for Vidocq Society members interested in jointly pursuing the matter. In some cases, a "working group" is assembled to more intensively advance that specific investigation.

MEDIA

Confidential information provided to the Vidocq Society and its members is kept confidential. The policy of the Vidocq Society is to neither confirm nor deny any role in any investigation. The Vidocq Society is a private organization and is not obligated to provide access, information, or explanations to the media or to the public. The Vidocq Society does not provide real-time media access to investigations, nor does it release information about cases it has helped to solve. If the Vidocq Society is assisting in any investigation, any information would come from the law enforcement agency.

The Vidocq Society recognizes the valuable role that the media can afford in the truth-



gathering process, however, and the role that publicity may play in advancing the cause of an investigation of an unsolved death. At the request of the investigating law enforcement agency, the Vidocq Society will alert local media that a particular death is being presented or investigated. Any case and crime details, however, would be provided by the investigating agency and not the Vidocq Society.

Service to society is the goal of the Vidocq Society and its membership. Its mission is to search for truth and to seek justice for crime victims and their families. In doing so, the Vidocq Society continually aids law enforcement and contributes to the public good through its pro bono service. The fresh perspectives brought to cold cases by these professionals from divergent walks of life has aided in the solution of many cases nationwide. Will yours be next?★

Further information may be obtained from the Vidocq Society World Wide Web site.

Contact Information:

The Vidocq Society
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215-545-1450
<http://vidocq.org>